

Most Interesting Life Story in Livingston County

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Most early settlers in Livingston County were farmers who emigrated from other states or European countries. Some of them served in the Civil War.

One early settler, Peter Josef Mies (1834-1900), had the most interesting life story of any early settler. Peter J. Mies was born in Germany in 1834, and his parents were Gottfried Mies and Anna Shutz. Peter J. Mies was the third of nine children in the family. Peter's father only owned three acres in Germany, and it was not enough land to support a family of 11 people.

Peter's family was relatively poor, and his mother homespun their clothing. Their kitchen table was made of heavy oak, and in the center was a bowl-like depression that held mixed food. Around the table's edge were smaller depressions that were used instead of plates. Underneath the table, a small strip of wood held the spoons, the only eating utensils they owned. Their food was usually some soup, and often, the cupboard was low on supplies.

At the age of 16, Peter started a three-year Carpenter apprenticeship. He worked for two and a half years as an apprentice and six months as a tradesman. Peter lived at home, and his father had to provide the wood for him to practice on. During his schooling, Peter learned how to properly sharpen all the tools used by carpenters. As a graduation project, Peter made a long wood plane.

After graduating as a Carpenter, Peter found that the pay for workers in his trade was very low. Peter's father encouraged him to take a job in the mines, but Peter did not like that idea. In that era, Peter also faced mandatory military service.

Peter decided to emigrate from Germany to America. He sneaked out of Germany to avoid mandatory military service, and in 1854, his ship arrived in New York Harbor. Peter was 20 and had 10 cents in his pocket, so he traveled to Chicago. Peter made friends with a German family living in Mendota, Illinois. He then got a job in Michigan, helping to cut down pine trees for lumber. Peter was too frail to be a lumberjack, so his job was to sharpen the tools used by the work crew.

Peter then caught the gold mining "bug" and decided to go to California to strike it rich in the gold fields. Peter went to New York but found he did not have enough money to pay for passage on a ship that would leave New York, sail around Cape Horn, and go on to the California gold fields. Peter decided to take the ship as far as his money would pay for, then stop and work to earn the money to travel the rest of the way to California.

When the ship reached Cape Town, Peter ran out of money. He then worked for six months in a South African copper mine. Peter later recounted that the miners were a very rough and low-class bunch of men.

Peter's co-workers in the Cape Town copper mine often frequently talked about striking it rich in the Australian Gold Rush. Peter changed his plans and decided to sail for Melbourne, Australia. In Melbourne, Peter found work as a carpenter, helping to build a new church. While he was in Melbourne, Peter saw a sack of corn with Mendota, Illinois, printed on the sack. Peter was homesick for his German friends back in Mendota, so he set sail from Melbourne to San Francisco. This ocean voyage took 177 days to get to San Francisco.

When Peter got to San Francisco, the American Civil War was taking place. Peter enlisted in the California Infantry. He was disappointed that he was assigned to stay in California instead of fighting in the big battles out East.

After serving three years in the U.S. Army, Peter sailed from San Francisco to the Isthmus of Panama and walked across Panama to the Gulf of Mexico. Peter then took a ship to New York and returned to see his German friends in Mendota, in LaSalle County, Illinois.

After arriving in Mendota, Peter worked on the Enenbach family farm during the summer. He also did work as a carpenter. Peter met and liked one of the young Enenbach daughters, Elizabeth Enenbach.

Peter decided to travel to Omaha to get a job helping to build the new Transcontinental Railroad from Omaha to San Francisco. The railroad boss put Peter in charge of building all the wood water towers needed to provide water to the steam locomotives.

Peter then asked Elizabeth to come to Omaha. Peter and Elizabeth were married in 1867 in Omaha. Joseph was 32, and Elizabeth was 19 when they married. She helped to care for Peter's wood tank builders, who boarded with them. Their first son, Will, was born in Nebraska. Their son was the youngest person present at the big ceremony where the Golden Spike was driven in Utah on May 10, 1869, completing the Transcontinental Railroad.

Peter and Elizabeth Mies saved \$4,000, equivalent to \$103,450 in today's dollars. They bought 160 acres near present-day Saunemin and tried farming. Unfortunately, 1873 was an abysmal weather year for agriculture, and Peter had no experience farming in Illinois. At this point, the family had four children to support. The family moved back to Mendota, and Peter worked for the railroad for four more years.

The Mies family then moved back to Saunemin and resumed farming. The introduction of railroads in Livingston County made farming easier because needed supplies could be imported, and farm products could easily be exported. Clay field tile was introduced in the 1880s, draining the swampy land in Livingston County. Peter and Elizabeth Mies successfully raised their eight children on their farm.

One of the seven sons of Peter and Elizabeth Mies was Henry J. Mies (1869-1932). Henry J. Mies' hobbies included history, geology, collecting Native American artifacts, and glass plate photography. Henry. J. Mies gave a speech about Native American history to the Pontiac Kiwanis Club, which was so interesting that it led to the creation of the Livingston County Historical Society in 1924. This Society celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2024.

One of the grandsons of Peter and Elizabeth Mies was Ernest G. Mies (1911-1977) of Fairbury. Ernest Mies farmed northwest of Fairbury. He served in the U.S. Army in World War II and received the Purple Heart in France. Ernest Mies was a John Joda American Legion Post member and was director of the American Legion Speedway for many years. Ernest Mies was well-known in the Fairbury area because of his work with the American Legion Speedway, the Fairbury Fair, and the Fairbury Board of Education.

Peter Josef Mies had one of the most interesting life stories of any settler in Livingston County. He was raised as a member of a relatively poor family in Germany. He learned the carpenter's trade in Germany and emigrated to Michigan to work in a pine tree logging operation. Peter worked as a South African copper miner and worked in Australia as a gold miner and carpenter. Peter served in the Civil War and helped to build the Transcontinental Railroad. He concluded his working career as a successful pioneer farmer in the Saunemin area.



An 1886 photo of the Peter and Elizabeth Mies family. Peter Josef Mies had the most interesting life story of any of the pioneer settlers of Livingston County.

